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ABSTRACT

The JOB project (JOB, 2000) was a European-funded program run between January 1998 and June 2000. It involved a consortium of partners in Birmingham, UK, and a network of transnational partners across Europe. The aim of the project was to develop remote vocation guidance to disabled people in their own home, fully utilizing computer mediated communication. One of the concerns had to do with how to prepare tutors to work remotely, through computer mediated communication (CMC) and as a result, designers developed a Virtual Tutor training within JOB. This was accredited through the Open College Network of the West Midlands, and consisted of five units up to level three. Since 1998, over 120 Virtual Tutors have been trained. Learners have been recruited from higher education, further education, adult education, health and social care and some unemployed people from disadvantaged groups. This program is accredited and is delivered remotely using CMC. Evaluation results indicate that this has been a positive experience for the learners even though, for some, it has been a steep learning curve, particularly around mastering technology. Key issues for learners are described in this paper. (Author/AEF)

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Virtual tutor training – The JOB Experience

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Abstract: The JOB project (JOB, 2000) was a European funded programme run between January 1998 to June 2000. This involved a consortium of partners in Birmingham, UK, and a network of transnational partners across Europe (GATE, 2000). The aim of the project was to develop remote vocation guidance to disabled people in their own home, fully utilising computer mediated communication. One of our concerns was about how to prepare tutors to work remotely, through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) and as a result we developed our own Virtual Tutor training within JOB. This was accredited through the Open College Network of the West Midlands, and consisted of 5 units up to level 3.

Since 1998, over 120 Virtual Tutors have now been trained. Learners have been recruited from Higher Education, Further Education, Adult Education, health and social care and some unemployed people from disadvantaged groups. This programme is accredited and is delivered remotely using Computer Mediated Communication. Our evaluation indicates that this has been a positive experience for the learners even though, for some, it has been a steep learning curve particularly around mastering technology. In this paper the key issues for learners are described.

Introduction

The JOB project (JOB, 2000) was a European funded programme run between January 1998 to June 2000. This involved a consortium of partners in Birmingham, UK, and a network of transnational partners across Europe (GATE, 2000). The aim of the project was to develop remote vocation guidance to disabled people in their own home, fully utilising computer mediated communication. Partners in Italy also worked on developing tele-guidance, partners in Italy, Spain and Finland worked on aspects of tele-training and partners in Finland, Spain and Italy also focused on tele-work opportunities.

Across Europe we were bound together by our user group (people with disabilities) and our use of Information & Communication Technology to enable people to access services where and when they wanted to.

In the UK one of our concerns was about how to prepare tutors to work remotely, through Computer Mediated Communication (CMC). The steering group had all been previously involved in a CMC programme and had completed remote Computer Mediated Tutor training at a London University. This training was focused on the need of lecturers in Higher Education and it was felt that as we were working with a very different client group our needs, therefore, were significantly different. Thus we developed our own Virtual Tutor training within JOB. This was accredited through the Open College Network of the West Midlands, and consisted of 5 units up to level 3.

Since 1998, over 120 Virtual Tutors have now been trained. Learners have been recruited from Higher Education, Further Education, Adult Education, health and social care and some unemployed people from disadvantaged groups. This programme is accredited and is delivered remotely using Computer Mediated Communication.

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We have feedback from 47 learners (37%), requested halfway through the programme and at the end. The evaluation documents have been reviewed and key features extracted from these. Additional material has been extracted from the archived on-line study rooms of each of the groups.

The Virtual Tutors programme:

'CMC has a lot going for it as to when I work, reflection time on what I post, I can change my work as many times nt, I don't have to join in with everything that is going on. The atmosphere is relaxed, I don't feel pressurised to compete.'

Aim of the programme:	*To facilitate the transfer or adaptation of teaching and learning skills to a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) environment and to enable the development of new skills required to work effectively within an electronic campus*
Objectives	*Include gaining experience as a learner within CMC: identifying benefits in education and training: exploration of teaching and learning styles and adaptation to a CMC environment: curricula development: explore confidentiality, student support, engagement, copyright: working without the benefit of non-verbal communication.*

The Virtual Tutor programme runs over a 15-week period and learners are expected to study for 3 to 4 hours a week. This is a remote programme and tutors work in the same virtual college as the JOB students – their future potential clients. The Virtual College was designed to accommodate a Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) methodology and was built using Lotus Notes. The Virtual College consists of a study room per group, common room and library. Each of the learners have a copy of the Virtual College on his/her own desktop. The is a collaborative programme (each of the learners starting, and working through, the programme as part of a group), but this is set in an asynchronous medium thus giving people the opportunity to work when they want or were able to.

The Virtual College was designed to extend the learners *possibility space*. *Possibility space* is a space where all our ideas live before we bring them into being (Battram, 1996). When we explore ideas we explore possibility space, which is indeed in our mind. We do this using language because, according to Battram, the world we inhabit is constructed in language. Ones own *possibility space* is very small in the scale of things, but joined to other peoples *possibility spaces* we can create a massive expansion of views (and visions?). We have all experienced at some time the 'buzz' of exploring an idea with a group of enthusiastic people, and this idea turning into reality made possible by the joining together of different perspectives built on different experiences.

How do we join together our *possibility spaces*? For this we need a *search space*. This is an environment that allows people who would otherwise never meet to get together and discuss common issues. This can be in a face-to-face environment but applies favourably to the context of a CMC environment – our virtual college.

Technology:

Not all learners on this programme were introduced to the concept of CMC in the same way. The range of help in getting started ran from being sent an installation manual and a CD to attending a Induction session and being helped to load the technology. In addition, learners recruited to this programme were found to have a range of Information & Communication Technology (ICT) skills, knowledge and experience (from no experience to very experienced). The 2 extremes are demonstrated by the following quotes:

A learner with no *'Well I have to say that I have amazed myself.... I have been such a technophobe*

prior experience: *for years and I have really enjoyed getting to grips with this machine!'.*

' I started the course as a disgruntled sceptic – I thought the programme looked a bit tacky (I am one of those sad individuals who goes for flash over function) but as time progressed I grew to develop a mild fondness for the simplicity of the programme'.

An experienced user:

Each of the extremes brought different issues to the delivery of the programme. For the learner new to ICT some of the introductory activities created difficulties in themselves. Changing symbols to text (in order to demonstrate that computers don't always receive messages as we have sent them) is a good example of this. One learner wrote *feel sufficiently frustrated to think about why I was doing all this; and then when others showed me the way through by their understanding or accidental discovery of the 'answer', I learnt something I wont forget!* Others write about the positive aspects of the programme compensating for the steep learning curve required in mastering the technology.

The technical difficulties, writes one learner, appear to be at the beginning when people are stressed. Once that is over 'the programme seems beautifully simple when used for discussion, and quite effective in learning ICT skills off other participants'. However, for some rising to the challenge of the technology in order to engage in study may not have been worth the perceived gains of succeeding in the programme of learning. This may be why we saw a relatively high dropout rate during the first 2 weeks of learning.

Can we apply theories of compliance to this problem? Compliance in medical terms is about patients following a prescribed treatment. 'Compliance denies the right of a patient to be heard and freely decide that he would rather accept his disease than the tedium of taking his medication and suffering the side effects, which on occasions may restrict the patients life style more than the disease itself' (Henry, 1985). This can equally be applied to learning. ***The challenge of becoming competent within a CMC environment may, for some people, be worse than not becoming knowledgeable about the subject area of the learning programme.***

For those who were experts or skilled in the use of ICT, the tutor felt that the issues were to do with trying to get the learner to **change the focus** from the medium onto the curriculum. Many were able to do this but unfortunately a few were not. Of course other variables come into play here, not in the least the existence of any pre-course teacher training and subject specialism.

Getting Started:

As already discussed, learners had a varied introduction to the virtual college, CMC and the technology. The most a learner received in the way of induction was a 3-hour session where we discussed the principles of CMC, talked about the programme, guidelines for being an on-line learner and demonstrated the system. No learner was given 'hands-on' experience at this point. Some learners received nothing other than the handbook and software.

One of the big issues at this time is lack of prior knowledge or visualisation of what on-line learning means to the learner. It is difficult to imagine how 'it' works or what is required. Therefore the expectations of learners are not well formed and generally, in this programme, were about finding out what on-line learning was about and experiencing it. This led to the need to lead, advise, encourage learners through the programme until they were responding speedily to activities, and each other, and had picked up techniques for working effectively in this medium. For all groups progress into a 'comfort' zone was at different rates. Some groups 'gelled' early while others didn't 'gell' at all. The factor that considerably affected this *appeared* to be the combination of personalities within the group.

Most learners in the review expressed the desirability of meeting face-to-face early on, even though some people had a really good experience and very much enjoyed the programme having never physically met the facilitator or the other learners within the group. However, many also identified the need for programmes to be delivered totally on-line, without dependency on initial meetings, for the sake of inclusion of the people from disadvantaged groups or who lived to far away.

Group size and other practicalities:

The group size: The majority of learners felt that a group of 10 was a desirable number to work with in CMC. This is small enough to keep up to date with all entries and get to know fellow learners. Smaller than this and learners commented on feeling exposed (as happened in peak holiday periods) and more than this and it would be difficult to get a feeling of group cohesion. In addition, nearly all recognised the pressure of work that bigger groups would create for a tutor/facilitator working in this methodology.

When learners engaged in the programme: The majority of the learners on this programme were working full time. Nearly all reported working late at night and for some this was really good in that they could settle down and relax while engaging in the programme. For others who worked up until 9 p.m. at night (for example those employed in Adult Education), sitting down to study when they came home was seen more as a chore and learners felt less able to give of their best. Replication data indeed shows that the most popular time for learners (and the tutor) is between 9 p.m. and 11 p.m. and daytime Sunday.

How long learners worked every week: Learners were asked to work for 3-hours a week over the 15-week period. The majority of learners reported working for up to 10 hours a week and reasons for this was the amount of reading and responses required, the time it took to formulate responses when keyboard skills were not well developed and, most importantly for some, the enjoyment factor.

Theories of *flow* may contribute to the time learners spent in study. According to Csikszentmihalyi, (in Jenson, 1995), optimal learning requires a state of consciousness known as *flow*. This is where one loses oneself in performance and where time passes very quickly because one is absorbed.

Group work and Collaboration:

Collaboration appears to be a double-edged sword! This programme was seen by the developer as one way of enabling busy people to access learning when able to. It is designed to fit around social, work and family life and accommodate fluctuations in health and availability etc. Indeed the majority agreed that this was one of the great advantages of CMC.

However, one learner writes: 'One problem is that the need for collaboration enforces the need for everyone to work at the same rate for the success of the learning to occur.' In addition, when learners were absent for any period of time through going on holiday, pressure of work or ill health, they often found the amount of discussion to catch up with was considerable. Even ignoring the unread documents in favour or joining the new activities made learners feel anxious as the unread entries constantly showed up in the system in another colour – a constant reminder of what had been missed.

In spite of this, the majority of learners were very positive about the group and collaborative nature of the medium. One learner writes *'I have found the collaboration/communication issues particularly challenging (and quite* and another *'Being put in such a diverse group has been a great experience, differing perspectives have broadened my considerations'*.

Further advantages appeared to be seen as *'Loads of space for individuality and time to hide behind someone else sometimes while you think things through'*. A great advantage!

What do learners need in order to be effective within a collaborative environment? Harri-Augustine & Weble (1995) believe that learning operates on the 'edge of chaos' which sits between 2 states known as **order** and **chaos**; two extremes of behaviour. In **order** we demonstrate predictability and don't adapt to change. We use the same pattern of responses over and over again. We are complacent and unresponsive. The opposite of this is **chaos**, which is a system of **disorder.**

Between **order** and **chaos** we find **complexity**. This is a state now recognised as allowing information to organise and reorganise itself to increasing degrees of sophistication. This is the state that allows a person to construct new and more complex meanings.

What meaning does this have to CMC learning? The approach used in the asynchronous, collaborative on-line learning environment is one of constructivism. Within this the learners are facilitated, through on-line activities, to collaborate towards a shared goal. The learners themselves are viewed as the greatest resource, each bringing skills, knowledge and experiences that are used to formulate differing perspectives, influences and approaches to the activities. Thus learners organise and reorganise information, or in other words, construct new meaning.

Jenlink & Carr (1996) would also argue that the discussion used within collaborative environments had to be *design conversation*, as opposed to discussion. This is defined as being goal related and focusing on creating something new. It facilitates contributors to extend their capacity to hear and inquire into other peoples perspectives.

Tutor / Facilitator:

This programme has been heavy on tutor time with, on average, the tutor being available for 5 hours a week. This has been more at the beginning of each programme and less towards the end as learners develop skills in collaborative practice. The majority of learners have made comments about this (both within the programme and during reviews). The majority has appreciated the constant feedback and encouragement given by the tutor and this has appeared to be a big factor in retention of learners.

Many learners have also commented on the tutor as a good role model. However, this has also led to many concerns that the learners had about being able to replicate this role, partly because of time constraints. Concerns were also expressed about whether or not Organisations and/or managers would allocate the right amount of tutor time to development and delivery on-line. The reality of embedding this methodology within mainstream services has always been a concern for learners within the programme.

'I have not particularly missed face-to-face – but I think this is because the tutor is quite a good responder and you always feel she is there.'

Learners tended to like the time limits set for each activity (posted on a Sunday with a deadline of the following Friday). A range of styles was used from individual activities, discussions of a collaborative nature that were summarised by a learner, group product development and small group-work. Although the small group work was the most unpopular (mostly because of the time it takes to form into groups) a lot of learning took place overall from this (often negative) experience.

Finally:

'I feel as though I have learnt as much, if not more, on this course than if I had worked on a face-to-face basis. This may well be due to the time for reflection and the fact that I have been able to read everyone's c

For those who completed the programme there is a sense that this has been a positive experience even though there have been steep learning curves for some, particularly around mastering the technology. Learners have used the words 'positive' and 'challenging', as descriptors of the programme in general but the authors would also add 'fun' and 'enjoyable' as a further two descriptors. Humour has been used to motivate and further engage learners and learners have responded well to this.

Some really serious issues have been discussed in this programme, and these have included current practice around copyright. This has been a big issue when applied to on-line learning and a surprise for many that such tight boundaries exist. In addition, several learners have been keen to debate the cost of on-line learning for Organisations and the issues around how funders view this methodology. Finally, on-line learning assessment has been widely debated and interesting perspectives have emerged for further consideration by all.

This has been a very positive experience for the learners, tutor/developer and managers. The programme is now available within the mainstream services offered by the originating College of Further Education and in demand by those who see the changing face of education and training within the developing new age. The final words we leave to a learner.

'..this is a new methodology and we have a ground floor opportunity to help with getting it right. I hope that between us we can help, if only in a small way. It has helped me, certainly, through a changing time in my life. Not only have I made new friends, but I have also learned a tremendous amount, not only general knowledge but about myself. I have moaned a lot, but hopefully for the right reasons and in a constructive way, because I would like to be part of it'.

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Further Information:

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